

Pathology of the Heart in the Qur'ān: A Metaphysico-psychological Explanation

Absar Ahmad

Abstract: *According to the Qur'ān, heart is the faculty by means of which an individual grasps the truth of ultimate moral and metaphysical verities. These functions can be disturbed—a condition which the Qur'ān refers to as diseases of the heart—due to a number of reasons. This article examines the nature and aetiology of the "diseases of heart" in the light of the Qur'ān. Human tendencies towards placidity, complacency and self-satisfaction, and the more dangerous capacity of self-deceptions, lead to the destruction of the inner vision and spiritual vigour, and to a "diseased" heart.*

In any meaningful account and assessment of the Muslims' contribution to currently on-going studies of mental health, one should turn to the Holy Qur'ān and see how it has coloured and shaped Muslims' outlook towards human psychology and morals. The Qur'ān, it will be generally agreed by all scholars of the Holy Book, possesses a cohesive outlook on the universe and human life. It is a document that is squarely aimed at man—indeed it calls itself "guidance for mankind." It is increasingly being realised now that the challenge to modern civilization is largely spiritual and psychological rather than planning, organization or technology. It is not planning and scientific development alone which will work the miracle and usher in the millennium that everyone dreams about. It is only by facing it on a spiritual-cum-psychological level that humanity can improve and reform this benighted and luckless world of ours. It is the human individual with all his tensions, his restlessness, his craving for a deity, if permitted to exercise a free mind and an unshackled soul, who will build the sort of world which science and technology between them have fallen grievously short of doing. The inescapable result has been the depression and deterioration of the human

individual, the dismemberment of the human personality and its subservience to animal passions.

Man, according to the Qur'ān, is Allah's creature just like any other created being; thus he resembles any natural creation for He fashioned Adam out of baked clay. But man is distinguished from the rest of natural creations by the fact that, after fashioning him, Allah "breathed His own spirit" into him. Thus the Holy Qur'ān conceives of man as a theomorphic and not an anthropomorphic being. There is something of a divine nature (*malakūtī*) in man; and it is in the light of this profound nature of man that Islam envisages him. That divine element in man is first of all an intellect, and a soul that can discern between the true and the false and is by its "primordial nature" (*fiṭrah*) led to Unity or *tawḥīd*. As such, the basic idea of Islam is that through the use of intellect and higher spiritual faculties, which discern between the absolute and the contingent or relative one should come to surrender to the will of the Absolute. This, in fact, is the meaning of the word *Muslim*: one who has accepted through free choice to conform his will to the Divine Will made known in detail in the divinely revealed law of the Qur'ān. Thus, according to the Qur'anic teachings, man is not a *Homo sapien*, but rather *Homo-cum-Deo* and is a composite being consisting of two substances viz., a physical or material element and a spiritual one. While Islam is the epitome of the Divine cosmic order, man as a physical being, is also an epitome of the cosmos, a microcosmic representation, *‘ālam al-ṣaghīr*, of the macrocosm, *‘ālam al-kabīr*. Man is both soul and body; he is at once a physical being and a spiritual one, and his soul governs his body as Allah governs the universe.

In a paper published elsewhere¹ I have taken pains to argue that, *pace* many modernist Muslim scholars, the Qur'ān presents a dualistic i.e., two component view of man. To my mind, the assertion "breathed into him of My spirit" (15: 29), is an explicit and categorical statement of a divine (i.e., spiritual) element or component in man. Taking it as merely a "faculty of God-like knowledge"² or "endowing man with life and consciousness"³ is tantamount to a total negation of the two-component Qur'anic conception of man and human personality. This very conception is further reaffirmed in most unambiguous terms in verses 12-14 of *surah al-Mu'minūn* thus:

Now, indeed We created man out of the essence of clay, and then
We caused him to remain as a drop of sperm in (the womb's) firm
keeping, and then We created out of the drop of sperm a germ-cell,

and then We clothed the bones with flesh—and then We brought (all this) into a new creation: hallowed, therefore, is Allah, the best of creators. (23:12-14)

God's breathing of His spirit into man and "bringing this fetus into a new creation" are obviously of immense metaphysical significance.⁴ Starting from *sulālah* up to the stage of fully-developed embryo, all the details have no doubt been given in order to stress man's humble origin. But what sets apart a human infant from an animal infant is the last episode in which it underwent, not only a totally new shaping but rather assumed an altogether different status as a spiritual being imbued with a soul. Thus "bringing into a new creation" clearly signifies the addition of a new ontological element—the—soul—into the living animal infant making him *Homo Dei*, God's vicegerent on earth. The locution *insān*, according to the Qur'ān, is not to be attributed to man's animal and corporeal body, but to that divine spirit or soul the presence of which makes man superior to angels. Out of a duality of two, one element of man—his spiritual psyche or soul—is the basis on which Allah has called the creation of human beings "best of moulds" or "best conformation" in *sūrah al-Tīn*. The verse 4 of this *sūrah* reads:

Verily, We have created man in the best of conformation (or in the best of moulds). (95:4)

And the very next verse refers to the carnal desires pertaining to his bodily component, undue indulgence of which abase him to the lowest of the low. To man God gave the purest and best nature in the form of divinely-infused spirit or soul, and it is man's duty to preserve the pattern on which God has made him. By making man His vicegerent, God exalted him *in posse* even higher than the angels, for the angels had to make obeisance to man. But surely man's position as vicegerent also gives him free will and discretion and if he uses them wrongly he falls even lower than the beasts. Abasement, and reduction to the lowest of the low is a consequence of man's betrayal, or corruption of his original, positive nature: that is to say, a consequence of man's own misdeeds and omissions. The spiritual element, the primordial and uncorrupted psyche, of man has a tendency towards its divine source and finds solace and fulfilment in God and His revelation—the holy Qur'ān. The bodily and corporeal part, on the contrary, exists at the purely animal level and always presses for more and more sensual gratification, thus personifying a man described in the Qur'ān in these

words:

... but he always clung to the earth or gravitated down to the earth and followed but his own desires. (7:176)

The notion of heart or *qalb*, *fuād* and *ṣadr* (in Qur'anic terminology) is foundational in the ontology and epistemic structure of the Qur'ān. Heart, in the Qur'ān, is symbolically the seat of the true self, the repository of soul, or the core and kernel of human personality of which we may be conscious or ignorant of, but which is our true existential, intellectual and thus universal centre. The heart of man is, as it were, immersed in the immutability of Being. Contemplativity is here stressed more than the sharpness of intelligence. In contemplation of the heart, things appear in their transparency. According to Islamic epistemic theory, the element that can unite the soul of man to God is love (*ḥubb* or *mohaḥba*), for love alone is desire of possession or of union; while discursive knowledge appears as a static element having no operative or unitive virtue. For securing a complete vision of Reality therefore, sense perception must be supplemented by the function or activation of what the Qur'ān describes as *fuād* or *qalb* i.e. heart. "Love" is held to include all modes of spiritual union, an eminently concrete participation in the transcendent realities. Intellect divorced from "love" is a rebel (like Satan) while intellect wedded to "love" has divine attributes. But surely "loving" Allah presupposes being conscious of Him. To be conscious of Him is to fix the heart in the Real, in permanent remembering of the Divine. Remembering or *dhikr* must be understood as referring essentially to an aspiration of the contingent being towards the Universal with the object of obtaining an inner illumination. Thus Allah reveals Himself to the rational soul which possesses organs of spiritual communication and cognition such as the heart (*al-qalb*), which knows Him; the spirit (*al-rūh*), which loves Him; and the secret or inner-most ground of the soul (*al-sirr*), which contemplates Him. It is in this context that the Qur'ān throws Allah's indispensability for man into bold relief. Just as Allah's "remembrance" and presence means the meaningfulness and purposefulness of life, the removal of Allah from human consciousness means the removal of meaning and purpose from human life. The warning in *sūrah al-Ḥashr*, "Do not be like those who forgot Allah and (eventually) He caused them to forget themselves—these are the unrighteous ones" (59:19), is of cardinal importance in this context. Allah's "remembrance" ensures the cementing of personality and

mental health and composure where all details of life and particulars of human activity are properly integrated and synthesized; "forgetting" Allah, on the other hand, means fragmented existence, diseased mind, "secularized" life, an unintegrated and eventually disintegrated personality, and (in Hegalian terminology) rootedness in the particularity of the moment. This is precisely what Muhammad Iqbal's distinction between Godliness and un-Godliness means:

The sign of a *Kāfir* is that he is lost in the horizons;

The sign of a *Mu'min* is that the horizons are lost in him.

Having said this much about the notion of heart in the context of Qur'anic metaphysical view of the human individual, let us now explore briefly the diverse ways in which the holy Book characterizes it.

- (i) According to many verses occurring in *surah al-A'raf*, *al-Hajj* and *al-Isrā'*, heart is the faculty or organ by means of which an individual grasps the truth of ultimate moral and metaphysical verities. The Qur'ān in this context uses the locutions *ta'qqul* and *tadabbur* with respect to heart's cognitive processes. And a heart that does not engage itself in deep and reflective thought is described as one that has "gone blind."
- (ii) Heart is mentioned in the Qur'ān as the organ of volition and intention. All our actions follow from the heart-germinated and heart-inspired motivation.
- (iii) True, sincere and genuine faith and belief is in the interiority of one's self or heart whereas verbal attestation of *Kalimah* only makes man a Muslim. Inner conviction and certitude is always in one's heart. A verse of *sūrah Hujarāt* makes it abundantly clear, "... and true belief has not yet entered their hearts."
- (iv) In contrast to "sick" heart, Qur'ān employs numerous expressions: e.g., *qalb mutma'nun bi al-īmān* (a heart pacified by *īmān*), *qalim-munīb*, (a heart moving towards, and desiring the proximity of God [50:33]) and *qalbin salīm* (a heart that is righteous and preserves the pristine purity of its positive primordial nature or *fitrah* [26:89]).

I shall now make a humble and modest attempt at analysing in detail the pathology of heart as explicated in the Qur'ān.

There are recurrent Qur'anic verses which speak about disease in people's hearts. The holy Qur'ān contains numerous allusions to "heart" in the context of hypocrisy or *nifāq*. Most of the Qur'anic assertions of *nifāq* are in the political or communal contexts. *Sūrah* 63 of the holy Book has the title *al-Munafiqūn* (The Hypocrites). It deals with the wiles, plots and pretexts of the dissemblers, whom it likens to propped-up timbers. At other places the hypocrites are described as a menace to military discipline, quislings under pressure, and vacillators guessing at their shifting fortunes. Earlier, we noted that Islam represents a whole civilization, a complete culture, and a comprehensive world order. It provides moral guidance in all walks of life. This is why Islamic values are not solely for the ascetic who renounces the world, but also for him who actively participates in different spheres of life, and works within them. The moral values which people generally looked for in monasteries and cloisters were placed by Islam right in the mainstream of life, and Prophet Muḥammad (SAS) along with his companions struggled hard for more than two decades to transform the socio-political ideals of the Islamic faith into concrete reality. It is in the context of this struggle that the character-traits of hypocrites are dilated upon by the Qur'ān, the inner dimension of which is termed by Allah Almighty as disease or malady of the heart. A hypocrite is the insincere person who thinks he can get the best of both worlds by compromising with good and evil. Thus he only increases the disease of his heart, because he is not true to himself. Even the good which comes to him, he can pervert to evil. What he lacks is firm commitment and dedication to Islam. Behind the outward disloyalties of the *munafiqūn* and their manoeuvrings lay the deeper questions of human soul-distress and heart's sickness. At four places in the Qur'ān, in opposition to *nifāq* (hypocrisy), is the phrase: "those in whose hearts there is sickness (*marad*)." I shall cite and try to understand them here in detail:

- (i) Verse 49 of *sūrah al-Anfāl*, which was revealed during and immediately after the battle of Badr, reads: "At the time when the hypocrites and those in whose hearts was disease were saying, 'their faith has deluded these (believers)'" i.e. into thinking that in spite of their numerical weakness and lack of arms, they could withstand the powerful Makkan army of the Quraish. "Those in whose heart was disease," is clearly a reference to the vacillating and faint-hearted among the Prophet's followers, who were afraid of meeting the Quraish in the battle.

- (ii) *Sūrah al-Aḥzāb* has three verses containing this phrase.
- a. Verse 12 reads: "And (remember how it was) when the hypocrites and those with diseased hearts said (to one another), 'God and His Prophet have promised us nothing but delusion.'"(33:12)

This, as authentic traditions tell us, refers to the prophetic vision of Muhammad, at the time of digging the trench, of the future of Muslim conquest of the whole of Arabian peninsula as well as of the Persian and Byzantine empires. Several traditions testify to the Prophet's announcement of this vision at the time in question.

- b. In verse 32, wives of the holy Prophet were asked to be truly conscious of God and their special position as wives of the Prophet and mothers of the believers and then advised, "... hence, be not over-soft in your speech, lest any one whose heart is diseased should be moved to desire (you); but, withal, speak in a kindly way" (33:32). In this verse the disease of heart undoubtedly refers to carnal lust and sexual laxity.
- c. Verse 60 of the *sūrah* describes the diseased heart with reference to perverse dealing, hostility towards Allah and the Prophet and moral defect or failing. Verse 52 of *sūrah al-Mā'idah* asserts that the hypocrites within the Muslim community vie with one another for the good-will of hostile Jews and Christians by trying to imitate their way of life. At other places the "disease" of heart is mentioned in the context of rancour or hate against the true Muslims, incredulity and impiety. It is a shiftlessness whose symptoms are lip-service and dissimulation.

Just as the Holy Qur'ān speaks about the strengthening and increase of *īmān* or faith, similarly it speaks of the deepening of the disease of heart and its becoming more intense. English translation of verse 125 of *surah al-Tawbah* reads:

But as for those in whose hearts is disease, each new message, adds but another (element of) disbelief to the disbelief which they already harbour. And they die while (still) refusing to acknowledge the truth.

That is to say, to those spiritually diseased, Allah's grace is unwelcome, and they put forth more doubts to cover their disease.

And they die in their disease, and of their disease. Literally the verse means that each new revealed message adds another loathsome evil to their loathsome evil i.e., makes them more stubborn in their denying the truth of Allah's message because they are determined to deny everything that is incompatible with their worldly desires. This stubbornness in denial and disbelief has been characterized in the Qur'ān as the "hardening" of hearts, *thumma qasat qulūbuhum* (2:84). That is to say, the hypocrites or the half-hearted ones gradually lose their ability to discern between right and wrong and consequently incline towards unbelief and moral depravity.

Disease, if incurable, is hardly a realm of metaphor which fits with entire condemnation. The thought of a sickness in hypocrisy might be expected to check somewhat the vehemence of a denunciation that reckons only with guile. The Qur'ān clearly declares the hearts' disease curable and offers itself as a cure or healing. Verse 57 of *sūrah Yūnus* speaks of "a healing ... for what is in the breast" (10:57). Verse 82 of *sūrah al-Isrā'* and verse 44 of *sūrah Fuṣṣilāt*, describe the holy Book as containing all that gives health to the spirit. The phrase "what the breasts conceal," which is a frequent one, undoubtedly relates to the inner secrets and hidden springs of action, where *nifāq* develops. To think of these, even if only in part, within analogies of sickness, is to see them more realistically than a mere countering caution would allow. It is characteristic that Islam finds the remedy in revelation itself. For its confidence throughout in the problem of human moral evil and waywardness, is in true knowledge afforded by the Qur'anic guidance. And since the guidance ought to be followed, even the "sickness" remains blameworthy and it should, quite reasonably be so, on account of the fact that the logic of bodily disease is different from that of psychical disease or ailment. We do not generally blame a patient for his physical sickness, though even here an element of blame is not out of place, if it comes through sheer negligence on the part of the individual. On the contrary, the disease of heart is contracted through one's voluntary and wilful moral depravity and lack of belief. The religious doctrine of Islam, *pace* Christian or some other religions, does not invoke any irrational belief or blind dogma in this context. For example, Kenneth Cragg, the well-known English orientalist quite unjustifiably laments that "... (in Islam) the sickness within sinfulness is not more gently, more patiently, treated."⁵ He, however, rightly observes that if there is a *marad* in *nifāq*, the hypocrisy is more than a deliberate disloyalty to the community. It is a malady in the inner recesses of human heart

and psyche. The sick are in truth those who spurn the remedy, the Qur'ān itself, the Divine Book that enkindles true belief in one's heart and provides curative for spiritual and moral ailments that thrive in its inner denizens. I fully agree with Cragg when he states that disease in the last analysis is not a political phenomenon. And he rightly opines that scholars "should probe into those depths of human soul-distress, of the psychic wronging of the self, of bondage to fear and pride, which are the final reaches of the human tragedy."⁶ He is, however, quite wrong in saying that the Qur'anic religion relies on the efficacy of the political in the search for healthy and true human being. There is no denying the fact that Islam, being a divinely approved *dīn*—a complete code of life—cannot exclude from its purview the political and collective dimension of human life. Yet the category of the individual, his self-purification and salvation is its central aim. I wonder how a deep and perceptive scholar like Cragg can altogether ignore the magnificent mystic tradition in Islam catering for the health and invigoration of the spiritual core of man.

A very brief mention of the aetiology of the "sickness" of the heart is in order here. According to the Qur'ān, the fact that man carries within himself evil tendencies as well as good tendencies distinguishes him from angels, who are free from evil tendencies and are, so to say, "automatically good." In any case, there is a struggle between these two trends or dispositions in man. But the evil trend does become very strong through the objective fact of the existence of Satan, whose machinations have myriad forms (including creation in man of placidity, complacency and self-satisfaction in his own virtue) and who, because of his (man's) innate tendency towards the easy and the immediate (compounded further by his dangerous capacity of self-deception) is able to dress up evil as good before him. Thus Satan and evil tendency can all but destroy the capacity for inner vision and spiritual vigour described by the Qur'ān as *taqwā* i.e., God-consciousness. It is not the strength of Satan as such, but the failure of man himself to show strength against the Devil's blandishments and temptations, that constitute the real threat to man. This tinsel and dazzling exterior of the material world so catches and overpowers his heart and mind that he "gets lost" in the immediate and forgets the *ākhirah*, the real, solid, long-range and consequential ends, the highest purposes. He "gravitates down to the earth," as the Qur'ān idiomatically expressed it. As a result, his heart, the innermost part of his being, becomes sick and his personality becomes hollow and spineless. The Qur'ān likens such men to propped-up timbers which

have no strength of their own.

It does little good, then, to heed the cavalier advice that nowadays comes so easily: "Do not think so much about yourself," "Get busy," "Take it easy." These suggestions do not seem adequate for what ails us inwardly. We should, on the other hand, begin to discover the plain truth that we are moral beings. We also have to make sense with our deeds and behaviour, with our purposes, motives and accomplishments. Instead of not thinking about ourselves and not having self-concern, it seems necessary, rather, to have a great deal of concern and to be very thoughtful about what one is making of oneself. The Qur'anic "therapeutic" conception of human nature and psychic well-being is thus radically opposed to the view presented by some modern psychologists and therapists. For example, Albert Ellis thinks that what we normally call emotional disturbance, neurosis or mental illness, largely consists of our demandingness.⁷ Ellis accordingly teaches his clients, that the really important thing in life is to remain relatively undisturbed and to please oneself. Surviving and remaining reasonably happy while surviving, is the moral ideal of such psychologists. They advise us to abjure "musts" "oughts" and "shoulds," not to be rigid, but remain constantly open to changes, and to have new experiences. The result, as any thoughtful person can see, is individualism, egoism, narcissism, manipulation of people, superficiality, aimlessness, distrust, anxiety, and ruthlessness, to mention just a few mishaps and misfortunes of man's essential inner reality.

Notes

1. Absar Ahmad, "Qur'anic Concepts of Human Psyche" In Zafar Afaq Ansari (ed.) *Qur'anic Concepts of Human Psyche* (Islamabad: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1992), 15-37.
2. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: English Translation of the Meaning and Commentary* (Al-Madinah: King Fahad Holy Qur'an Printing Complex, 14140 H), Note 15: 1968.
3. Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andlus, 1980), Note 15:29.
4. Despite these clear Qur'anic indications in favour of body-soul dualism, many Muslim scholars interpret the essential and the inner metaphysical core of man as merely life, and consciousness or "person." See for example F. Rahman's *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980) 17.

5. Kenneth Cragg, *The Mind of the Qur'an: Chapters in Reflection* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1937), 103-104.

6. *Ibid.*, 104.

7. Reference here is to a system of psychotherapy, the Rational Emotive Therapy (RET) of Albert Ellis. See his *Handbook of Rational Emotive Therapy* (New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1977), 27, and other writings published in various journals.